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ABSTRACT

Potential secondary school English teachers undergo a unique screening procedure at the University of Washington. The education faculty allows the English faculty to recommend qualified candidates for the English education program. Students considering teaching English as a career visit the English department's advisory office, where they complete several prerecommendation requirements, including a half-hour interview with a three-member committee. The requirements for assembling the requisite portfolio of relevant information for the interviewers involve six categories, three of which are designed to generate further reflection by the candidates on their aptitude and motives for teaching. Immediately following the interview, each interviewer rates the candidate on a 10-point scale, with 15 points required for a recommendation. Prospective teachers must then commit themselves to a three-quarter sequence, which combines education courses in psychology, classroom management, and methods of teaching with increasing responsibility in classrooms--from observation and occasional participation during the first quarter, to full or nearly full teaching responsibility during the third quarter. While systematic follow-up studies have not yet been undertaken to assess more formally the value of this recommendation procedure, informal and sporadic reports from secondary school teachers and principals suggest that the university is graduating strong beginning teachers. (HTH)

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WHO SHALL TEACH ENGLISH?

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ABSTRACT

Prospective teachers of secondary school English go through a unique screening procedure at the University of Washington. The process involves preparation of a portfolio and participation in an interview. Only those students who are recommended by the Department of English may proceed to the Teacher Preparation Program. The process tends to assure dedication to teaching and high quality of prospective teachers.

She claims that she loves reading, that literature has been her chief delight in her undergraduate studies. In fact, she's been a reader all her life. Now that she is a young adult--twenty years old and half way through her baccalaureate program at a major university--she is ready to declare herself as a potential teacher of English. She thinks that high school is the level for her "because the kids are more mature and able to read and talk about complex books."

Should she enter the teacher preparation program and, two years later, seek her first high school teaching position? With her respectable grade point average and the completion of her English major highly likely, what doubt can there be about completing the necessary Education courses and student teaching experience?

Perhaps doubt is not appropriate, but careful examination of her motives for teaching and her degree of readiness may be desirable. Those who are responsible for teacher preparation in the college or university can perform a service both to the candidate and to the candidate's future students by intervening significantly at this decision point. That is what has been happening for the past several years in the Department of English, University of Washington.

Before the inauguration of a process of portfolio preparation and interview, the institution had very loose control of people who would become teachers of English. Like most other colleges and universities, this university merely prescribed an English major (usually consisting principally of courses in British and American literature), a middling grade point average, and a few courses specifically aimed at teaching and certification, including one quarter of student teaching in a local junior or senior high school. Because enrollment in the teaching methods course

tended to be large, very little scrutiny of each student's talents for teaching was possible. The student teaching experience, largely handled by public school teachers, provided some opportunity to sift candidates for their probable teaching potential, but did not provide the assurance one would like to have that these were indeed teacher candidates of great promise.

With changes in program of the College of Education came the opportunity to do the more intensive sifting. Those changes meant that prospective teachers must commit themselves to a three-quarter sequence, which combined Education courses in psychology, classroom management, and methods of teaching with increasing responsibility in classrooms--from observation and occasional participation during the first quarter to full or nearly full teaching responsibility during the third.

The faculty of the College of Education left it to the faculty of the Department of English to recommend who should enter this program. At this point began the policy of careful screening of what had then (1977) become much smaller numbers of teacher candidates. (Still further screening occurs in the College of Education before students are finally accepted in the teacher preparation program.)

Students who are considering English teaching in secondary school as a career visit the Advisory Office in the Department of English. There they learn, usually for the first time, that they have to put their pertinent experiences and their personalities on the line. They must complete several pre-recommendation requirements, including a half-hour interview with a three-member committee of English Department faculty.

The requirements include completion of 90 quarter credits, including at least 15 of those in English at the University of Washington, with a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.0 (Gone is the middling academic record) and completion of about 70% of an approved English major for secondary teaching (Literature is still the focus, but linguistics and composition have a prominent place).

Furthermore, they must have at least one quarter of observation and experience with students in a secondary school. Such experience tends to dissipate illusions about the ways that English teachers spend their energy. It provides a first-hand look at the difficulties of getting students to respond vigorously to literature and to write with careful attention to logic, style, and substance.

The requirements for assembling a portfolio of relevant information for the interviewers involve six categories, three of which are designed to cause further serious reflection by the candidates on their aptitude and reasons for wanting to teach. Experience with the process suggests that for many candidates, especially the younger ones, this is the first time they have actually confronted themselves at close range and in detail about this significant decision. These three acts of self-revelation are the following: a written introduction in the autobiographical mode, which "will familiarize the interviewers with your concern for the teaching of English" (quoted from the printed explanation of procedures which each prospective candidate receives); a fifteen-minute casette audio-tape that includes a brief reading from a literary text and an informal discussion about that work between the candidate and a young person at the secondary level; a description of working with young people in out-of-school settings.

The written introduction is a trap for the naive and the unwary. It can seem an invitation to the glowing generality: "I want to devote my life to guiding young people in the true enjoyment of literature and to helping them express themselves effectively." But it can also be a chance to dig deeply into the significant experiences—both sweet and bitter--that have made the candidate a humanist and a realist. When statements of high principle seem grounded in the paradoxes of human experience, the candidate's written introduction becomes a credible basis for recommendation.

The audio-tape is revealing for what it suggests about candidates' capacity for genuine interaction with adolescents. Some choose young people whom they know well; most persuade a student in the school where they are observing to sit for the conversation. The literature they choose ranges from fairly obvious possibilities, like a Poe or Hemingway short story, to poetry of Theodore Roethke or a scene from an Ionesco play. Their "lesson plans" are sometimes highly detailed, usually with concentration on literary terms; more often, they are meandering question-answer sessions, with the candidate in the imagined role of teacher. In most cases, the tone of the discussion is suggestive of the candidate's probable ability to interact confidently with students.

The description of work with young people in an out-of-school setting sometimes brings forth reflective accounts of counseling experiences, talking to callers on the Crisis Clinic telephone lines, and tutoring in homes or social agencies. These accounts allow the interviewers to get some sense of the amount of energy the candidates are willing to put into volunteer efforts to meet human needs and of the social conscience that candidates may possess.

Candidates' portfolios must also contain transcripts of all college and/or university work, including a list of courses in which they are currently enrolled and which they plan to take before entering the teacher preparation program. Three letters of recommendation, "primarily from people who can assess your potential for teaching," are to be included as well.

Finally, candidates are asked to write a precis of approximately 200 words, based on an article in a current issue of a magazine, preferably one more like Atlantic Monthly than like Time. This requirement permits assessment of the candidate's ability to discern and express the essence of several reasonably complex ideas. In addition, candidates are invited to submit original essays, stories, and poems.

The half-hour interview takes place in English Department territory, approximately six months before candidates actually undertake courses in the College of Education teacher preparation program. Questions arise largely from the materials in the portfolio, with the interviewers--depending on personality--acting less like examiners than like mentors, offering observations about candidates' strengths and possible deficiencies, responding to their questions, and reinforcing the seriousness of a decision to undertake teaching as a career.

Immediately after the interview, each interviewer rates the candidate on a ten-point scale, with 5 as the first satisfactory rating. A total of at least 15 points is needed to recommend. Two alternatives exist for those not recommended: postponement or denial. A letter follows the interview, announcing the decision. Candidates who are postponed or denied are given an oral explanation of reasons. Should those reasons seem inadequate or unfair, students may use an appeals procedure.

Obviously, this is a very time-consuming process, both for the candidates and for the interviewers. Is it worth the time? Most of the University faculty and staff who have been involved agree that it is. They cite the responsibility of the University to exercise careful control over the quality of its teacher graduates and the cooperation between the two units--English and Education--that often operate in quite separate realms.

An advisor in English reports that about 80 per cent of the students who come in to inquire about secondary school teaching look at the requirements and leave the office, never to return. The relatively high grade point average is the chief obstacle for them, though many seem overwhelmed by the number of hoops the department requires them to jump. They had supposed that becoming a teacher requires only minimal preparation, little more than a routine major in English.

Those who are undaunted by the prospect of meeting the recommendation requirements nevertheless express surprise. Why is this the only department in the University to have such a rigorous procedure? Are people really ever not recommended, or is this hoop-jumping for its own sake? Such questions are certainly justified and may not be answerable to every candidate's satisfaction. This may, in fact, be one of the sources of flaws in the present procedure. A faculty member who is extremely familiar with secondary school teaching and with the University's preparation program should probably be involved at this point, to supplement what advisors tell candidates. This person would explain why the procedure exists and what the culminating interview is intended to reveal about teaching potential, thus helping to assure that candidates approach the developing of a portfolio and the interview with a clear understanding of their purposes.

It has become evident, statistically, that the procedure does not lead to automatic recommendation. With interviews held nearly every quarter since 1977, 75 per cent of the candidates have been recommended and 12 percent denied. Of those postponed, many reapplied and went again through the portfolio-interview procedure.

Advisors in the College of Education, who see the candidates next as they arrange for formal entry into the teacher preparation program, report more of the complaints about the process. "Some students have felt that it was too rough--whatever that means," said one. "Some are intimidated by it"; "Students do complain about the how complex the ordeal is"; "Others have mentioned being very uncomfortable in the interview,"said other advisors. They also cite a few administrative gaffes, none of which was beyond repair.

But these advisors also report implied satisfaction: "Normally the students who feel good about the process don't mention how they feel"; "Lately, they feel it's fair."

Faculty in the English Department--from a pool of about six--take turns serving on the interview committee. They agree that the procedure is fundamentally sound and is a significant fixture in the departmental responsibilities for teacher preparation. The current department chair put it thus:

> The potential advantages of our requiring the portfolio may be as symbolic as anything we do to indicate that this is a serious step about which we are concerned. That is, we want the students not simply to opt for teaching as they might opt to go to a movie but rather to make a considered choice. That means they must do some investigation, make their arguments first to themselves and then to a selection committee.

Another faculty member echoed this idea with the statement,

> The procedure also keeps students from turning to teaching as a last resort--we require enough to keep the lazy and uninterested away. This process also gives us as a department an opportunity to look at what we are producing, to see how English majors "turn out."

None of the faculty sees any serious flaws in the procedure, though one noted that some students have received some conflicting advice (a possible problem that could be prevented by the earlier recommendation of a designated faculty member to confer with all prospective candidates). One, however, observed that

> serving on the committee is not spread broadly enough around the department, and so a few of us must keep doing the task on top of other committee responsibilities... the faculty as a whole is missing an opportunity to learn something about itself.

Another thinks the audio-tape is an inappropriate requirement:

> First, it expects [sic] too much at this point in the student's career. Second, I recall taped documents too often being either dogmatic pronouncements (echoing teachers or critics) or general chit-chat that passed for interactive discussion. I would drop the tape requirement if it were my decision.

Still another, concerned about fairness and consistency for students, proposed staggered, two-year terms for interview committee members, "to assure that there were always at least two 'old' members."

Finally, in recalling feedback from students who had gone through the recommendation process, a faculty member summarized impressions this way:

> Most students remember their interviews as a frightening experience, probably because it was the first time they were asked to present themselves to a group of critical adults. Students who have been postponed/failed have cried, complained, and appealed. However, nearly all the students I've talked with recognize the value of the whole proceeding.

No systematic follow-up studies have yet been undertaken to assess more formally the value of this recommendation procedure. Informal and sporadic reports from secondary school teachers and principals suggest that

the University is graduating strong beginning teachers. Whether that strength is attributable to a longer, more rigorous try-out period in secondary school classrooms or to a more careful winnowing procedure is perhaps impossible to assess. But any program designed to prepare excellent teachers of English must have excellent candidates to populate it. The procedure explained here tends to assure that excellence.